

## James Madison: Life before the Presidency

Taken From the Miller Center at the University of Virginia

### **Life Before the Presidency**

Raised on a plantation in sight of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, James Madison, born on March 16, 1751, was a sickly child who never strayed far from his mother's side. His father, James Madison Sr., acquired substantial wealth by inheritance and also by his marriage to Nelly Conway, the daughter of a rich tobacco merchant. James's youth was marked by extreme changes. His most vivid childhood memories were of his fears of Indian attacks during the French and Indian War (1754-1763) and of the day his family moved from their little farmhouse to a large plantation mansion, Montpelier. He also suffered from psychosomatic, or stress-induced, seizures, similar to epileptic fits, that plagued him on and off throughout his youth.

Surrounded by seven younger siblings who loved and respected him, James devoured books and the study of classical languages. By the time he entered the College of New Jersey, which later became Princeton University, Madison had mastered Greek and Latin under the direction of private tutors. He completed his college studies in two years but stayed on at Princeton for another term to tackle Hebrew and philosophy. Back at Montpelier in 1772, Madison studied law at home but had no passion for it. In 1774, he took a seat on the local Committee of Safety, a patriot prorevolution group that oversaw the local militia. This was the first step in a life of public service that his family's wealth allowed him to pursue.

### **Friendship with Jefferson**

Events then moved quickly for the young man. Within two years, the colonies were on the brink of war with England, and young Madison found himself caught up in the debates over independence. In 1776, he became a delegate to the revolutionary Virginia Convention and would later push through statutes on religious freedom, among other measures, that he had worked on with Thomas Jefferson. In the regular election of delegates to the new state assembly, Madison lost to a less inhibited candidate who supplied the voters with plentiful helpings of free whiskey. Though defeated in the general election, he won appointment in 1778 to the Virginia

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Council of State, a powerful government body that directed state affairs during the Revolutionary War. In that capacity, he cemented his relationship with Thomas Jefferson, who served as governor of Virginia during the war years. From that time until Jefferson's death in 1826, Madison functioned as Jefferson's closest adviser and personal friend.

### **Earning Political Respect and Clout**

At age twenty-nine, Madison became the youngest member of the Continental Congress, and within a year, the small, soft-spoken, shy young man had emerged as a respected leader of the body. It was a tribute to his hard work and understanding of the issues. No one ever came to a meeting more prepared than Madison. For three years, he argued vigorously for legislation to strengthen the loose confederacy of former colonies, contending that military victory required vesting power in a central government. Most of his appeals were beaten down by independent-minded delegates who feared the emergence of a monarchical authority after the war. Along with Jefferson, the young Virginian persuaded his home state to cede its western lands, which extended to the Mississippi River, to the Continental Congress, a move which undermined numerous land-grabbing schemes by hordes of greedy speculators.

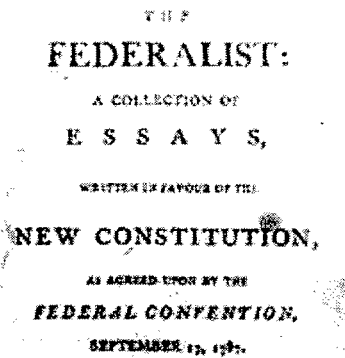
Returning to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1784, Madison battled Patrick Henry's attempts to tax citizens in support of the Christian religion. Henry, though a strong supporter of independence, nevertheless believed in state support of religion. Among the proposed laws that fell victim to Madison's relentless pressure were those designed to establish religious tests for public office and to criminalize heresy, though this later measure was not one that Henry supported.

### **Father of the U.S. Constitution**

Believing that weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation rendered the new Republic subject to foreign attack and domestic turmoil, Madison persuaded the states' rights advocate John Taylor to call for a meeting in Annapolis, Maryland, to address problems of commerce among the states. The poorly attended assembly issued a call for a national convention "to render the constitution of the Federal Government adequate to the exigencies of the Union." Madison led the Virginia delegation to the Philadelphia meeting, which began on May 14, 1787, and

supported the cry for General George Washington to act as its chair. When Washington accepted, the body achieved the moral authority it needed to draft a new constitution for the nation.

In the weeks that followed, Madison emerged as the floor leader of those forces supporting a strong central government. His so-called Virginia Plan, submitted by Delegate Edmund Randolph, who was then governor of Virginia, became the essential blueprint for the Constitution that eventually emerged. Its major features included a bicameral national legislature with the lower house directly elected by the people, an executive chosen by the legislature, and an independent judiciary including a Supreme Court. Madison's extensive notes, which are the best source of information available of the closed-door meetings, detailed the proceedings and his activist role in shaping the outcome. By September 1787, Madison had emerged from the Constitutional Convention as the most impressive and persuasive voice in favor of a new constitution, eventually earning the revered title "Father of the Constitution."



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significant early interpretation of the meaning and intent of the U.S. Constitution.

In achieving ratification, Madison confronted his old opponent Patrick Henry, who successfully worked to keep Madison from gaining a seat in the newly created U.S. Senate. Instead, Madison won election to the U.S. House of Representatives over James Monroe in 1789. For the next several years, Madison served as Washington's chief supporter in the House, working tirelessly on behalf of the President's policies and politics. Most importantly, Madison

Once the document was presented to the states for ratification, Madison, along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, published a series of newspaper essays that became known collectively as the Federalist Papers. Writing under the pseudonym "Publius," Madison authored twenty-nine of the eighty-five essays. He argued the case for a strong central government subject to an extensive system of checks and balances wherein "ambition" would be counteracted by competing ambition. This collection of documents, especially Madison's essay No. 51, are classic statements on republican government and stand as a

introduced and guided to passage the first ten amendments to the Constitution, which were ratified in 1791. Known as the Bill of Rights, these amendments protected civil liberties and augmented the checks and balances within the Constitution. In achieving the ratification of the Bill of Rights, Madison fulfilled his promise to Jefferson, who had supported the Constitution with the understanding that Madison would secure constitutional protections for various fundamental human rights—religious liberty, freedom of speech, and due process, among others—against unreasonable, unsupported, or impulsive governmental authority.

### **Breaking New Ground**

Madison eventually broke with Washington over the chief executive's foreign and domestic policies. He criticized Washington's support of Alexander Hamilton, the secretary of the treasury, who sought to create a strong central government that promoted commercial and financial interests over agrarian interests. He also found fault with the administration's handling of commercial relations with Great Britain and its seeming favoritism of Britain over France in the French Revolution. Madison's displeasure with the direction of national policy led him to join with Jefferson—who resigned as secretary of state in 1793—to form an opposition party known as the Democratic-Republicans.

To the surprise of most of his friends, on September 15, 1794, Madison married twenty-six-year-old Dolley Payne Todd, a lively Philadelphia widow with one infant son. The mature Madison, age forty-three at the time, had not noticed women much since a decade earlier, when the young Kitty Floyd had broken his heart to marry another suitor. Dolley had been introduced to Madison by their mutual friend Aaron Burr at a Philadelphia party. She immediately knew that he was a man whom she could love because of his gentle ways and high regard for women. She abandoned her Quaker religion, though not her Quaker family, to marry Madison. The two developed a bond of love and affection that lasted their entire lives.

During the presidency of John Adams, Madison led the fight against the Federalist-supported Alien and Sedition Acts. These laws, which attempted to suppress opposition to a Federalist foreign policy that favored England over France, were viewed by Democratic-Republicans as fundamental violations of the Bill of Rights. Madison authored the Virginia

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Resolution, adopted by the state legislature in 1798, which declared the laws unconstitutional—Jefferson authored a similar Kentucky Resolution. Returning to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1799, Madison campaigned for the election of Thomas Jefferson as President. When Jefferson won, Madison became secretary of state, a position which he retained until his own election to the presidency in 1808.

As secretary of state, Madison supported the Louisiana Purchase, the war against the Barbary pirates, and the embargo against Britain and France in response to their constant harassment of American ships and impressment of American sailors. Although it is difficult to know with certainty, due to Madison's tendency to avoid the spotlight, most historians agree with the French foreign minister at the time who said that Madison "governed the President" in foreign affairs. Rather than suggesting a weak President, Madison's domination of foreign policy actually rested upon the President's confidence in Madison and their mutual agreement on all matters of diplomacy. By 1808, the man behind-the-scenes stood poised to succeed Jefferson as the fourth President of the United States.

## Reading Questions

- 1) Describe Madison's health as a child. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) What were the most vivid memories that Madison had of his youth? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3) By the time he entered college, Madison was fluent in what two languages? \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) How long did it take Madison to complete his college studies? \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) After finishing college, Madison stayed for an extra semester in order to study what? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 6) What was the Committee of Safety? \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) What did the Committee of Safety do and why do you think it was important for Madison to join? \_\_\_\_\_  
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- 8) How old was Madison when he attended the Continental Congress? \_\_\_\_\_
- 9) During the Constitutional Convention, Madison authored a plan that would become the basis of the American Constitution. What was the name of his plan? \_\_\_\_\_
- 10) What is our best source of information about the events that occurred behind the closed doors of the Constitutional Convention? \_\_\_\_\_
- 11) What nickname did Madison earn at the Constitutional Convention? \_\_\_\_\_
- 12) Once the Constitution was presented to the states for ratification, Madison, along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, published a series of newspaper essays. What were those essays called? \_\_\_\_\_
- 13) During his time in the House of Representatives Madison fulfilled a promise to Thomas Jefferson? What was that promise? \_\_\_\_\_
- 14) What political party did Madison eventually join? \_\_\_\_\_